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ABSTRACT

Language arts teachers have usually restricted themselves to showing video interpretations of novels or filmed renderings of Shakespeare's plays, for fear of being labeled as that "person who shows movies." But film can be used as a "bridge" to other works of literature, i.e., terms, devices. For example, if the teacher wants students to gain greater insights into the component of the hero on the journey, why not have them first study "Star Wars"? Or use the film "The Natural" for teaching numerous literary components. It is a marvelous tool, abundant with examples, for teaching irony--verbal, situational, dramatic--starting with the characters' names (Max Mercy, Iris Lemon, etc.) through to the final scene where the hero (Roy) essentially comes up to bat against himself. There is also "Field of Dreams," a tremendous tool for teaching the hero's quest itself, and especially valuable in teaching allegory. Teaching thesis is always an integral part of any English curriculum. A series of Dr. Seuss videos is available which can be used effectively to move the students from recognition of theme to development of thesis. A recent release, "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou," establishes in its opening credits its relationship to Homer's "Odyssey." Each year more and more films are being released that have some degree of correlation with the "classics" of literature. Opportunities for finding relevant materials are limited only by the imagination of the instructor. (NKA)

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Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

Presenter: Martin Vogt, Chandler, Arizona
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Through the course of time with instruction in language arts, teachers have often been reticent to include motion pictures in the course of their syllabus. Rather than suffer the (often vitriolic) diatribes of colleagues, they have instead restricted themselves, "film-wise," to showing the video interpretations of the novel or the director's rendering of Shakespeare's play—Romeo and Juliet, Taming of the Shrew, Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet, etc. After all, how many instructors are comfortable with the labeling by one's peers as that "person who shows movies!!" And yet, what is one of the foremost common denominators that often links a student's interests with a teacher's interests? It is not literature; it is film! So then, why not take advantage of this link, this "bridge," as an opportunity to crossover to the "student side of the street" to hopefully bring that student back to the "instructor's side of the street." For instance, why not use Wayne's World with allusions found in Bohemian Rhapsody and Garth's misadventures with his "love" to allow the student to clarify his/her understanding of relevant components of Macbeth, or The Cure as a link to Huckleberry Finn. Then, what about using Field of Dreams as a resource for Beloved or White Squall and pairing it with Homer, Kipling, and/or Coleridge.

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However, before I begin to illustrate ways in which I've used this technique in my own classroom, I must, first of all, remind the reader that my personal philosophy is that I will never use the film to substitute for the literature itself. Thus, if we are going to read Malamud's The Natural in class, then we will not view director Barry Levinson's version. Instead, we use film as a "bridge" to other works of literature, i.e., terms, devices. Furthermore, it will always remain at the discretion of the instructor whether to use the film in its entirety or simply an appropriate excerpt.

Let's then first take a look at how this works by starting with the literary concept of the "hero's quest" (Odysseus, Sir Gawain, Beowulf, et. al.) and its place in literature. If we want the students to gain greater insights or perhaps simply just another perspective into the components of the hero on the journey - be it a function of the novel or the epic - then why not have them first study Star Wars. In Lucas's particular adaptation, he through Luke Skywalker reveals not only how the hero takes risks, overcomes obstacles, has a guide, etc., but also vividly displays all the components of the quest itself in an often more user-friendly format than any other modality.

Or, let's look at this strategy from a different perspective - that of the film itself. Barry Levinson's The Natural is a wonderful vehicle for teaching numerous literary components. First of all, it's a marvelous tool, abundant with examples, for teaching irony - verbal, situational, and dramatic - starting with the names of the characters themselves (Max Mercy, Iris Lemon, etc.) through to the final scene in the movie where Roy essentially comes up to bat against

himself (note Jon Rhodes' description) and knocks out all the lights in the stadium thereby fulfilling the judge's worst nightmare. Then, there's the aspect of the "river/road" motif as exemplified by Roy's journey with the use of the train and its tracks and his instances of being "on track," off track," and "sidetracked." Add to this mix some archetypes - Iris as the good, nurturing Earth mother; Harriet as her evil counterpart, Max Mercy as a shadow, and the prevalent use of the forces of nature. Finally, there is the presence of allusions with Whammer (a Babe Ruth symbol himself), who calls Roy "Huckleberry" along with the lightning bolts of Zeus, and Iris's (a messenger of the Greek gods) reentry into the story to guide Roy back onto his chosen path.

Then, there's also Field of Dreams, a tremendous tool for teaching the hero's quest itself. But more significantly what I've enjoyed through the course of using this film in my classroom over a period often years is that this particular film is especially valuable in the teaching of allegory. While the class is continuously being entertained on the surface level by Ray Kinsella's voice-inspired journey which will culminate in his "playing catch" with his father, on the secondary level we can see how Ray is actually on an internal quest to fill a large void in his life and achieve reconciliation. In addition, the plot evolves around transformation - the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth - from the initial destruction of the field of corn to provide for the birth of the baseball field which subsequently allows the rebirth of "Shoeless" Joe Jackson to occur, through to Ray's pivotal meeting with Terence Mann, concluding in the emotion-charged final scene where the eight-man practices die to create the

birth of the game itself which will then provide a vehicle for the rebirth of Ray's father. Accordingly, this cycle is also prominent on the secondary and more personal level for Ray as well.

In another vein, two excellent examples of films which I've also used successfully over the years to teach symbolism as a segue to the study of poetry are: Robin Ward's The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey and Rain Man (there's always a student at the local university who will, for a small stipend, be very happy to edit controversial material). The latter abounds with water, roses, a number, and wheels as important symbols in the plot's development, while the former provides symbols such as bells, torches, water, white horses, and ladders. And, while on the subject of poetry, one might consider including A Knight's Tale and/or On Borrowed Time as effective supplements to the instructor's Chaucer unit.

An interesting (and especially captivating for adolescents) film, which I've begun to use recently to illustrate a concept sometimes referred to as the "objective correlative" is Simon Birch. Have the students trace the presence of the baseball as the link for the characters involved in Joe's search to discover the identity of his father and Simon's quest to fulfill his destiny.

Teaching thesis is always an integral part of any English curriculum. There is, fortunately, a wonderful series of Dr. Seuss videos available, which I've also used effectively to move the students from recognition of theme to development of thesis by being able to more readily visualize the focus; these include: "Sneetches," "Green Eggs and Ham," and "The Cat in the Hat."

A recent release. Oh Brother, Where Art Thou, establishes in its opening credits its relationship to Homer's Odyssey. Each year more and more films are being released (the aforementioned A Knight's Tale is another example) that have some degree of correlation with the "classics" of literature. English teachers are for the most part creative and resourceful individuals. The opportunities, therefore, for finding relevant materials are limited only by the imagination of the instructor. However, what's most important to remember when choosing to use films to complement your instruction is to not be afraid to take risks and always to enjoy yourself.